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AUTHOR Keough, William F., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Individuals who have been on all sides of a teacher strike need positive outlets for winding down; such outlets should be carefully designed by the superintendent of schools. The first group to be considered is the public--both the sympathetic public and the angry public. Another group that must be dealt with are overresponsive strike leaders disappointed by their sudden loss of the limelight. Also important are righteous school board members whose former regard for teachers has turned to enmity and spite. Attention also must be paid to potential conflicts between unwilling strikers, enthusiastic strikers, and teachers who were "out sick" during the strike, to similar potential difficulties between building principals, and to the differing attitudes of parents who are angry about the strike, parents who supported the strike, and parents who are willing to forget the strike. Faced with this situation, the superintendent should 1) aid reconciliation between the school board and teacher leaders, 2) foster a climate for educational renewal, 3) brief all staff members on the new contract, 4) launch a community and teacher involvement program, 5) maintain a statesmanlike demeanor, and 6) exercise persistent leadership in order to help people help themselves. (Author/JG)

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FENCE MENDING AFTER THE STRIKE

William F. Keough, Jr.

Presentation at 1974 Annual Meeting
of American Association of School
Administrators

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM:

Good afternoon.

Today I would like to address my comments to the aftereffects of a teacher strike. As I understand our arrangement here today, the panelists will respond to my comments with their personal reactions in terms of experiences with a teacher work-stoppage in districts with which they are affiliated. The basic problem in any post-strike environment centers around the fact that the people involved have spent weeks, or even months, gearing themselves up for a strike - should it become necessary.

Consequently, emotions have been riding high. Suddenly, when the strike has been legally terminated, we have a problem. Our problem seems to be the anti-climax. Individuals who have been on all sides of the issue now require positive outlets for "winding down"; such outlets should be carefully designed by the Superintendent of Schools in the district.

An explanation of the motivation and unique characteristics of the individuals and groups involved in the strike activity - and how we design channels for constructive use of their energies - will be my major points today.

FRAME OF REFERENCE:

Much of what I will say is based upon experiences in Huntington, New York, which endured a teacher strike in May of 1968. My appointment to the district Superintendency in Huntington came in October of 1968. Other references will be to the Burlington, Massachusetts school strike which took place in September of 1972. Both districts were experiencing a strike for the first time and both strikes lasted approximately 8 to 10 days.

BACKGROUND:

Most of us here in this room today will agree that the bitterness of work stoppages is many times directly related to attitudinal build-ups which have taken place over a long period of time. The history of relations between a Board of Education and the staff members in a school district is generally reflected in the issues which suddenly arise during critical negotiations periods.

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The fairly unique aspect of a teacher strike, in my opinion, is related to the fact that teachers have for so many years been convinced that they are "too professional" to employ such a labor union measure as work stoppage. The recent change in attitude about this tradtional stance is one which can be quite traumatic.

So then, an educational staff which had made a conscious decision to strike is bringing to that task a dedication-to-cause feeling which runs deep. What I am saying is that a teacher union decision to strike is one which commits the total emotional and intellectual resources of a substantial segment of any given community. It's a difficult decision for teachers,although getting easier all the time, and once made is not easily reversed!

In this room today we are not so much concerned with the justice, injustice, or wisdom of the strike procedure. As Superintendents we must assume the strike to be a reality in our lives. Whether we believe in the strike procedure or not, our task today is to deal with actions which are necessary to overcome the ill effects of human passions run amuck.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED:

In trying to deal with post strike feelings, we first need to examine the individuals involved in some of the predicaments in which they now find themselves. Let us deal with just a few in order to present a picture of the emotional chaos which the School Superintendent faces.

The first significant group of individuals in any community is the public. I refer to the sympathetic public as well as the angry public. The sympathetic public may well be venting their wrath not at members of the teacher force but at School Board members or even Central Office administrators who the public feels were responsible for the inconvenience of school closing.

The angry public will inevitably be presenting a lengthy petition calling for the jailing or dismissal of all teachers who were a party to the strike. At any rate, the strike leaders themselves will be in for considerable criticism and harrassment from this group. In 1972 the leaders of the Burlington, Massachusetts teacher strike did not get out of the way soon enough and spent some time in jail. In addition to that, 4,000 to 5,000 citiizen names were listed on public petitions calling for the dismissal of all teachers involved in the work stoppage.

Next in the line of post-strike personalities who must be dealt with could well come the over-responsive strike leaders who seem to be disappointed by the sudden loss of limelight which the strike-ending brings; look for this group to thrive upon a daily revival of their finest hour.

For many strike leaders, this experience has represented the first major recognition granted them by their community.

It is extremely difficult for these strike leaders to return from a "point of recognition" - be it positive or negative - back to "everyday teacher status."

It is indeed a sad commentary that a teacher in the status of strike leader can receive more recognition from the community in that role than in his role as an educator.

Look for intimidation and a steady stream of grievances from this group who wish to maintain, at any cost, their new-found recognition.

The next type, and perhaps the most difficult, is the righteous School Board member whose original light regard or even high regard for teachers as a professional group has degenerated to enmity, spite and vengeance-to-be-wreaked.

Such School Board members will be exhibiting wild-eyed anger, possibly as a mask for their own bewilderment. Count on certain members of this group never again to look with positive feelings on administrative recommendations which benefit teachers in any way, whatsoever. These Board members will be the best argument for a school district's having a professional negotiator who will keep the School Board removed from the frustrations of the negotiations table. Local Board negotiators, like local Teacher Association negotiators, do not like to lose and frequently cannot or will not forgive and forget.

Some of these School Board members will also be reacting to public charges that they "gave away the store." This reaction will no doubt move from an initially defensive position to a public image of "talking tough." Like some of the negotiations committee of the local Teacher Association such School Board members will be intoning the reverberations of the losing coach in the annual sports rivalry; their cry will be, "Wait 'til next year."

Occasionally we find some School Board members in post-strike districts gesticulating in demogogic fashion and shouting in phrases which strangely parallel historical writings:

> "The voters of this school district may soon forget what I (School Board member) might say here, but they will never forget what THEY (the Teachers' Association) did here to our district and to our children."

And you had better believe that he or she will work toward that end and will keep the community pot boiling!

Some of the other personal characteristics of those involved are obvious if we consider staff members who fall into the following categories:

1. Unwilling strikers who were unhappy with the prospect of walking a picket line or who were frightened by the whole confrontation;

2. Enthusiastic strikers who all too willingly now express their resentment of those who didn't strike or who didn't participate in strike activities;

3. Supportive to the strike - building principals who are now feeling pressure from other principals who perhaps maintained the school administration's (School Board) policy line;

4. The unfortunate few who were "out sick" and are now feeling the wrath from all of the above groups;

5. Parents who were incensed at such rash action of their children's teachers;

6. Parents who supported the strike activity and happened to have children in a non-striking teacher's class;

7. Parents who are willing to forget.

Lest we forget, a key element in the post-strike chemistry must be the Superintendent of Schools. We sometimes might as well start with the in-coming new Superintendent since the incumbent in many cases is "throw out with the wash" and serves as a scapegoat while all parties attempt to save face. Some Superintendents may deserve this treatment; I suspect most don't.

All in all, it is safe to say that when the strike is over, the feelings - deep feelings engendered in people of dedication - are still rampant and preying upon all efforts to put aside a bad experience.

WHAT NEXT?

Into this morass of feelings - feelings of guilt, defeat, victory, anger, envy, hate... the list of emotions is long - into this quagmire enters the Superintendent who knows all too well the need to move differing segments of a staff from hard-earned polarized positions to a neutral meeting ground. When I refer to staff, I mean teachers and administrators.

This is a slow process, but it is a process. It must be pursued by the Superintendent and his office personnel with an awareness that both Staff and Board of Education need positive, carefully constructed outlets for winding down.

EDUCATION AS A RALLYING POINT:

Invariably, the first uneasy moves toward conciliation will reveal themselves and will require encouragement and nourishment from principals and other district supervisors.

Most frequently, principals have found a renewed interest in educational quality and curricular elements of school life to be a common ground for mutual discussion and action.

The principal or supervisor who cannot foster and nourish a renewal of educational program interests needs some special attention! I'd recommend a study leave, or a year's loan to industry, but under no circumstances "kick him upstairs." Help him - he needs your support to bring him through his own conflicts.

In connection with the matter of educational renewal, thought must be given to the need for a different level of interaction between the Board of Education and Teacher Association leaders. Each group needs and deserves an opportunity to show "his other side."

The bringing-together of both parties by the Superintendent will demand careful planning and structuring. The coming-together of both groups will indeed more resemble the gathering forces at a school imposed seventh grade dance!

Discipline on the part of both sides, however, will be required lest they split into previous adversary positions.

This coming-together nevertheless is important, since such a level of interaction can well set the stage for constructive implementation of the new teacher/school board contract. On the matter of the new contract, I'd strongly recommend that a considerable amount of time be spent reviewing with all parties the new terminology and understanding. Since new terminology sometimes influences the implications of old contract language, it is most important that all administrators understand not only the old contract but the changes which have been made, with all their ramifications.

The unfortunate history of post-strike activities in many districts reveals an avalanche of grievances and arbitrations. The more bitter the feelings during any strike, the longer seems to be the grievance list in the following years. I refer here specifically to the experiences of Huntington, New York, and Burlington, Massachusetts.

In two years following the 1968 Huntington strike there were close to sixty formal grievances, more than half of which went to arbitration. In the year following the Burlington, Massachusetts 1972 strike more than forty grievances have been registered.

Although many grievances are valid (and I don't wish to denigrate the grievance process), there are times when the procedure seems to be an attempt to extend contract benefits through convenient interpretation of vague or cloudy contract terminology. In addition to this, building administrators' unawareness of the meaning of contract changes can well lead to bumbling interpretations which may require the grievance procedure and arbitration procedure to clarify. Here again I remindyou of the over-responsive strike leader, whose spotlight has been removed, and now needs to perpetuate "his finest hour".

Thus does the Superintendent need to plan briefing sessions for all administrators responsible for carrying out the contract, which has in fact become Board of Education policy. Some principals will object to changes and the Superintendent's job is to make clear that personal objections cannot be allowed to influence procedural matters which are spelled out in the School Board/Teacher Association contract. In addition, the Superintendent has other personality-related duties:

1. He must see that references to the strike are kept at a minimum, if necessary at all;

2. He must make provisions that reprisals, recrimination or intimidation of strikers or or non-strikers is not tolerated;

3. He must see that efforts are made to ease parents and teachers back into communication, this is particularly important where the public has taken sides in the shouting matches usually associated with strikes in small districts;

4. The Superintendent must encourage his principals to take an active role in relieving building tensions, in whatever ways seem feasible;

5. The Superintendent should try to assure that the strike issue will not be worked over and over again in P.T.A. and other type meetings. Some of Huntington's schools formed Parent Volunteer groups which worked directly with teachers in the classrooms. The help provided was coincidental to the improved communication among individuals who had been divergent in their views of the strike.

Lastly, the Superintendent must guarantee that any inclusions in the new contract of increased teacher involvement in curriculum planning, evaluation, personnel selection, etc. are strictly followed. It is a fact that such language is sometimes viewed by administrators as menacing. Once in the contract, however, the Superintendent has a right to expect that administrators as well as teachers will do their part to carry-out these new procedures.

Should one or both parties resist such efforts, it is the responsibility of the Superintendent, as the executive responsible for school district policy, to see that these measures are implemented. This can be difficult at times since teacher negotiators sometimes include provisions for which teachers themselves are not yet prepared. Sad, but true!

Based upon four years experience in such a situation as I have described above, I would caution anyone faced with the post-strike prospect to take patience pills in the recommended dosage. Difficulties encountered are not always with the strikers; sometimes the true frustrations are attributed to unbending School Board members, autocratic Middle Management, scapegoat seeking Taxpayers, and feisty shop-steward types in the teacher ranks who enjoy the action of the grievance procedure.

IN SUMMARY, the Superintendent who finds himself in a post-strike situation needs to exercise every skill at his command in the area of group process and human motivation. He needs to:

1. Structure teacher leader and School Board meetings-of-understanding;
2. Foster a climate for educational renewal;
3. Totally brief all staff on new contract terminology;
4. Launch a community and teacher involvement program;
5. Maintain a statesmanlike demeanor in spite of the frustrations provided by any one of the groups involved;
6. ...and weave his way through the post-strike minefield of human emotions and not let up in his leadership. Particularly must he be persistent in helping people to help themselves.

Such leadership was perhaps best described by the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu over 2500 years ago when he wrote:

A LEADER IS BEST

When people barely know that he exists,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
Worst when they despise him.

But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will all say, "We did this ourselves."

William F. Keough, Jr.
Superintendent of Schools
Bedford Public Schools
Mudge Way
Bedford, Massachusetts 01730